The Charles Williams Society

N E W S L E T T E R

No. 64, WINTER 1991

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

16 May 1992: The Society will meet from 11am to 5pm and hold its AGM. The AGM will start at 11am. Following that, at about 12 noon, Ruth Spalding will read, with the assistance of three other voices, her script of "A Portrait of Charles Williams", first broadcast on the BBC third programme on 13 September 1961. After lunch Rev T Gorringe will speak on "Eros and Spirituality".

7 November 1992: Professor John Hibbs will speak on "Charles Williams and current economic thought".

Both these meetings will be held at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1.

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 29 March 1992: We will start to read The House of the Octopus. We will meet at St Matthew's Church Vestry, 27 St Petersburgh Place, London W2 (nearest tube stations Queensway and Bayswater) at 1pm. Tea and coffee will be provided but please bring sandwiches.

OXFORD READING GROUP

For information please contact either Anne Scott (Oxford 53897) or Brenda Boughton (Oxford 55589).

CAMBRIDGE READING GROUP

For information please contact Geraldine and Richard Pinch, 5 Oxford Road, Cambridge CB4 3PH (telephone Cambridge 311465).

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA READING GROUP

For details please contact Charles Huttar, 188 W. 11th St., Holland, Michigan 49423, USA. Tel (616) 396 2260.

DALLAS CATHEDRAL READING GROUP

For details please contact Canon Roma King, 9823 Twin Creek Drive, Dallas, Texas 75228, USA.

GEORGE MACDONALD SOCIETY MEETING

Aidan Mackay, of the G K Chesterton Study Centre (and a member of the Charles Williams Society) will give a talk to the George MacDonald Society on George MacDonald and his influence on Chesterton and C S Lewis at 6.30pm on Wednesday 13 May 1992 in Room 27c, Kings College, Strand, London WC2. Tickets are £2 (including a glass of wine after the lecture) are available in advance from Margaret Richardson, 64 Albert Street, London NW1 7NR or at the door. Please confirm to Margaret Richardson (tel 071 405 2107 or 071 387 7940) if you wish to attend and she can supply any additional information needed.

NEW ABOUT BOOKS

John Docherty of the George Macdonald Society kindly offers to obtain Eerdmans paperback editions of C.W. novels (except Shadows of Ecstasy) if any of our members have difficulty. His address is: 9 Medway Drive, Forest Row, East Sussex RH18 5NU.

John Witherington has written to say that the March 1991 edition of Book and Magazine Collector carried an article he had written on C.W.'s life and work witha guide to prices for second-hand copies of his texts and witha few photographs. Mr Witherington's news comes with the warning that,as the magazine took well over 4 years to publish his article, the prices quoted will be out-of-date.

NOTE FROM GILLIAN LUNN

Gillian Lunn has written to say that she warmly thanks all those individual members who kindly responded to her request for advice in February. No decisions have yet been made.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Please note that subscriptions are due to be renewed from 1 March 1992. A form for this purpose is enclosed.

BOOK REVIEW

Studies in Medievalism: Inklings and Others and German Medievalism, Volume II, Numbers 3,4. Winter, Spring 1991. (D S Brewer, 538 pages, price £25).
Review by Dr Barbara Reynolds.

This beautifully produced volume contains two articles of special interest to members of the Charles Williams Society: Charles A Huttar's "Arms and the Man: The Place of Beatrice in Charles Williams's Romantic Theology" and Judith J Kollmann's "Charles Williams's All Hallows' Eve: A Modern Adaptation of Dante's Commedia. Professor Huttar, whose article was previously delivered as a paper to the Society and published in the Newsletter, reminds us that Williams's concept of the "Beatrician Vision" is not as widely understood as could be wished. This is not surprising, as it seems remote to most of us, though Dorothy L Sayers maintained that the experience was common to many poets and not exclusive to Dante. (1) Nor was it exclusive to Charles Williams. He asserted that he developed his view of romantic love by himself, independently of Dante, yet, as Professor Huttar says: "It was important to him that the Beatrician experience possess some universality". This delicately discerning article goes some way towards helping us to believe that it does.
Profesor Kollmann traces the influence of Dante on Williams to 1910, when he proof-read a reprint of Cary's translation. Typically, his reaction to Inferno was to exclaim: "But this is true!" His last novel, All Hallows' Eve, Kollmann maintains, is a deliberate adaptation of the Commedia. The parallels are striking but, here and there, somewhat forced. Sayers was a predecessor in such parallel-seeking, in the lecture she delivered in 1950 to the Summer School of the Society for Italian Studies: "The Cornice of Sloth" (2), in which she finds Dante's theme of the Succubus in Williams's novel Descent into Hell.

There seems to be a growing tendency to perceive Dante as a continuing presence in the imaginary world of the

Inklings. He appears also in Lionel Adey's article, "Medievalism in the Space Trilogy of C S Lewis". It happens that I have just now been privileged to read an advance copy of David C Downing's Planets in Peril: a Critical Study of C S Lewis's Ransom Trilogy, in which this author too discovers parallels between That Hideous Strength and Dante's Inferno.

The second part of this volume, dedicated to the theme of German medievalism, adorned with handsome illustrations, contains impressively scholarly articles which extend our awareness of Medievalism, a concept first brought into focus by the Editor and originator of this series, Leslie J Workman.

1. It was her intention to follow her translation of the Commedia with a book on this subject, to be entitled The Burning Bush.

2. See Further Papers on Dante (Methuen, 1957), pp 119 - 147.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to Mr and Mrs John Matthews, 34 Ingleway, North Finchley, London N12 0QN.

* *

At the Society's meeting on 22 February 1992, Kerryl Lynne Henderson spoke on "Charles Williams: The Early Poetry". We are pleased to be able to reproduce the talk in this Newsletter.

This talk is about Charles Williams's early poetry. I had hoped to cover his first four published books, but due to the abount of information pertaining to the early work, I will, for the purposes of this talk, focus on the first volume, The Silver Stair, and on the literary environment out of which Williams wrote his poetry.

When Williams was born in 1886, two years before T S

Eliot and twelve years ahead of C S Lewis, Queen Victoria had reigned for nearly fifty years and was at the height of her popularity. Her son, Edward VII, took the throne in 1901 when Williams was fifteen years old, and was in turn succeeded by George V in 1910. The Silver Stair, a sonnet sequence on the subject of Love, was written just before the accession of George V, when Williams was in his early twenties. Three more volumes of poetry were written over the next decade. Williams's formative years as a poet thus spanned a period of significant change in literary creation. He was born at the end of the Victorian era, a period which to a great extent stressed traditional values and social concerns, and he had been writing poetry for some fifteen years before the modernist movement made its definitive, radical break with the foundations of Western culture and thought (Eliot's Waste Land and Joyce's Ulysses were published in 1922).

Yet in his early poetry Williams does not easily fit into classifications such as Victorian or modernist, nor is his work characteristic of the traditional romantic realism of the Georgians. In large part this elusiveness of classification is due to the distinctive perspective he brings to bear in his poetry. Despite his adherence to traditional poetic forms, which would rank him with the Victorians, Williams's perspective might be described as a refusal to confine himself to a singular view of a position he affirms or repudiates, which puts him closer to the modernists. That is, although he is a man of definite and strongly held views, he continually, in his writings, takes those views and tests them from many angles - head on, obliquely, inside out, by negation, by affirmation, by metaphorical transference, by wrenching, by division, by unity, and so forth. His skill in attempting this multiplicity of perspective varies from poem to poem. He is often accused of obscurity and awkwardness of expression because a general coherence fails to emerge with sufficient clarity. Nonetheless, his letters and personal communications do not indicate a man who sees himself darkly confused or in cosmic uncertainty about the nature of the universe. God rests comfortably at its centre.

God also rests uncomfortably at its centre. Both views are true, but only together. Neither expression is wholly true, alone. It is the tension between these two recognitions that characterises Williams's writings throughout his life: "This is Thou; neither is this Thou". He was not a dualist - darkness was not equal and opposite to the light for him. Light is always better, and the best, and finally darkness will flee before it. But darkness has not fled yet, and as long as we live in a world where darkness is present, it will show us something about the light. Nothing is wasted in the Divine Economy. Williams does not magnify darkness (ie evil, cruelty, ignorance, suffering) for its own sake, though at times he seems to come perilously close to doing just that, but rather lets it serve the light, and values it according to its service. This approach led to severe problems with some critics, such as Theodore Maynard who, while reading Poems of Conformity, decided Williams was a Satanist and wrote a scathing attack in The New Witness, Chesterton's weekly newspaper published in the early 1900s. (I should add that Maynard later retracted his accusations, conceding that Williams was an Anglo-Catholic who had "established for himself a philosophical point of contact between Paganism and the Christian faith".) (1) And it is true that, despite Williams's commitment to Christian principles and beliefs, his approach to the mysteries of life is far from straightforward in his writings. It does set him apart from the popular Victorian approach, such as that represented by his father's poetry and stories and his uncle's antiquarian books, and also from the prominent literary figures who influenced Williams particularly at this early stage of his poetic career, writers such as Patmore, Thompson, Meredith and Yeats.

Background Influences. Before we look at The Silver Stair, it might be useful to examine in more detail the published work of members of Williams's family, beginning with his father, Richard Walter Williams, who published under the name "Stansby", a family name. According to Alice Mary Hadfield's biography of Williams, his father was an avid reader and had many books in the house. He spent much time in discussion with Charles about poetry and history. These discussions helped Charles formulate

his own views of life. In the poem "Divorce" (1920) Charles states that, as a young man he turned for instruction to

> [...] such souls as, torn with pain,
> Have proved all things and proved them vain
> And have no joy thereof,
> Yet lifting their pale heads august
> Declare the frame of things is just,
> Nor shall the balance move [.]

Such a one was his father,

> Who taught me all the good I knew
> Ere Love and I were met:
>
> Great good and small, - the terms of fate,
> The nature of the gods, the strait
> Path of the climbing mind,
> The freedom of the commonwealth,
> The laws of soul's and body's health,
> The commerce of mankind.
>
> The charges launched on Christendom
> You showed me, ere the years had come
> When I endured the strain,
> Yet warned me, unfair tales to balk,
> What slanders still the pious talk
> Of Voltaire and Tom Paine.
>
> What early verse of mine you chid,
> Rebuked the use of "doth" and "did",
> Measuring the rhythm's beat;
> Or read with me how Caesar passed,
> On the March Ides, to hold his last
> Senate at Pompey's feet!

Walter Williams not only read about and discussed these subjects, he also wrote poems and stories which reflected his philosophical outlook. It is not clear when Walter began to write for publication, but in 1876 a 16-page periodical entitled The North London Magazine began circulation in the "northern parts of London called Hoxton, Kingsland and De Beauvoir Town" (NLM, V.1,p.2). At the time the Williams family resided in the area of

North London known as Holloway. Three years later, in 1879, Walter's first story, "Jim", and poem, "December", appeared in NLM, after which he became a regular contributor, publishing nine poems, six stories, and the first five chapters of a serial story over the next year and a half.

The North London Magazine was a monthly journal similar to other Victorian periodicals of the day, such as Dickens's Household Words (1850-59), though it did not particularly set out to expose social evils, as Dickens did. In the opening issue, the editors define their goals. First,

"we may as well candidly confess that our reasons [for this venture] are not entirely unselfish; but that, being Printers, we are ambitious enough to desire likewise to become Publishers; and we hope to follow, with some measure of success, the practice of most printers of any importance, of being also the proprietors of a periodical, which whilst it will be useful to others, will also be serviceable to ourselves, by keeping us well before the public, and thus enabling us largely to increase our connexion." (p.2)

The printer was F J Robinson, initially, of 12 Hyde Road, London, North. The editors invite contributions from "those of our friends and readers who may wish to contribute", which, they hope, "will greatly add to the interest of the Magazine, and be the means of bringing out the latent abilities of many aspirants for literary fame residing in the locality" (p.2). They guarantee a circulation of 3,000, with a minimum readership of 10,000, and "For advertising purposes we trust that this Magazine will become one of the best mediums for the neighbourhood" (p.2). They are also determined to maintain a high moral quality in the "for the most part entirely original articles" which make up the journal:

"The trashy and only semi-moral tendency of much of the light reading of the present day will be avoided, and whilst the contributions, it is hoped, will sometimes be

found amusing and humourous, none will be admitted, the morality of which is not of the highest character." (p.2)

This insistence on high moral standards was shared by Dickens's Household Words, a family journal intended to replace what Dickens called the "villainous" periodical literature of crime and sensation that was so popular among some of the reading public of the day. (2) Though Dickens's journal ceased publication in 1859, it was restarted in 1861 by his son, Charles Dickens (known as Charley), and several of Walter Williams's poems, and possibly short stories, were also published in this journal. Unfortunately, contributions are anonymous, making it difficult to know which ones were his, apart from the two poems which formerly appeared in NLM ("December" and "Janus"). (3)

Nevertheless, Walter's poems and stories in The North London Magazine give us a good idea of his approach to literary creation, which was essentially harmonious with the philosophical approach of the editors. The general tone of the magazine was uniform throughout its five and a quarter years of publication. Each issue for the most part included a serial story (sometimes two), articles about nature (e.g. "The Falls of Niagara", "The Winter Moth"), general science ("Our Coal Fires"), places of interest ("A Tour in North Wales", "Tintern Abbey"), anecdotes, instructive articles ("Turning over a New Leaf", "The Siege of Leyden") hymns and poems, articles directed to younger readers, and serial articles such as "Literary Celebrities" (18) and "Spiritual Characters" (5), as well as occasional short stories. The poems and stories were usually didactic and infused with Christian principles. There was little attempt at subtlety of thought or expression and no ambivalence about the demands of existence. Life, literature, vicissitudes, Scripture, all were readily comprehensible when viewed with a good dose of common sense, folk wisdom, and acknowledgement of the Christian verities. The challenge of life was to conform oneself to the obvious - obvious, that is, if one just took a little time to look and meditate, and then pray. Take, for instance, Stansby's poem, "Parted" (1880, p.28):

PARTED

"With Christ, which is far better"

Dark as the cloud in stormy sky,
  And chill as winter's breath,
The silent shadow passes by,
  We speak of here as Death.
No home but one day feels his power,
  No home but yields in thrall,
And learns at last, in some dread hour,
  His rule is over all.

And so he takes them, one by one,
  He turns their life's last page,
Maiden or mother, sire or son,
  Fresh youth, or hoary age.
He calls them, and they fade and sink,
  And vanish from our side,
We stand upon the river's brink,
  But they have crossed the tide.

Oh Saviour Christ! Thou knowest all
  The bitter sense of loss;
Be near us when the shadows fall,
  And help us bear the cross.
Though lonely here the path may be,
  Where pain and sorrow are,
We trust our dear ones dwell with Thee,
  And that is better far.

Here we see the overt, unselfconscious reliance on Christ to meet our needs as life's sorrows assail us. Again, a selection from opening paragraphs of Stansby's stories gives a sense of the down-to-earth, deep but uncomplicated view of life:

"Only an Old Maid": "Yes, my dear, you are quite right, I am "only an old maid", one of a class of persons that you young people look upon with, I believe, a mingled feeling of pity and contempt. No; I am not offended with you, though I confess to being a little hurt, not by your thoughtless words, but by the recollection of the past that they bring afresh to my mind. You have sometimes asked me why I never married,

and if you would care to hear the story - it is not a long one - I will tell you now."

"A Strong Temptation": "Sunshine; sunshine everywhere. On quiet villages and busy towns; on open highways and on narrow streets, the gladdening radiance fell. Wide fields of corn, waving and bending in the summer breeze, took from the beams a deeper tint and richer hue of gold, and sweet wildflowers, on mossy bank and fragrant hedgerow, turned bud and blossom upward to the sky, and drank in warmth and life."

"For Her Sake": "[...] In the shadow cast by one of the boats, a young man was lying resting his head upon his hand, and gazing dreamily out across the glittering sea. His features, if not regular, were pleasing, with a frank, and open expresion though there was a lack of resolution and settled purpose indicated by the lower part of the face, giving the impression of one ready to plan, but slow to execute; one who would deserve success, but in nine cases out of ten would lose it through want of energy in action."

Perhaps the grandest opening is that to "Beyond the Grave":

"Night brooded over the Imperial city. In his mansion slept the noble, in his hut the slave. Here and there a few revellers broke the silence with their shouts, but, as the hours wore on, these grew less frequent, and at last died entirely away."

As is suggested by these selections, Walter's stories are characterised by a sensitivity to the human plight, an attention to character, an embracing of the natural wonders of creation. The general tone is one of acceptance of the world, and resolution to meet its vicissitudes in a morally responsible way. The world is not a place of mystery where we strive to unlock its secrets, but a rational, moral world whose fundamental unknowns (i.e., the mysteries) are an unquestioned part of the greater whole, which is itself not a mystery. God and His universe, as it were, will forever remain in part unknown, and that is not just acceptable, but comforting

in its own way; the finite needs the infinite. There is no sense of existential yearning for something just beyond reach, "die blaue Blume". This view of the world is clearly shared in the poem by Charles's aunt on his mother's side, Alice Wall, also published in The North London Magazine (1880), entitled "Looking unto Jesus". The poem has four four-line stanzas of rhyming couplets and sounds very much like a hymn. For example, stanza three begins, "If with sorrow life seemed crowded, and the world so full of sin, / Follow in the Saviour's footsteps, peace and comfort thou shalt win." We know that Charles was relatively close to his Aunt Alice, for in 1911, when he met with Alice Meynell to discuss The Silver Stair, Charles wrote a long letter to his aunt describing the meeting. We have no way of knowing whether he was familiar with his aunt's poem, but he was no doubt well aware of the general attitude toward God and the world reflected in it.

Charles was also acquainted with his uncle's writings, although he does not seem to have been as comfortable with his uncle as with his aunt. In the same letter to Aunt Alice mentioned a moment ago, he concludes by urging her to "Tell Grandma as much as seems good to you: but not my respected uncle. Time enough when the book comes out for his remarks." (f.3v) By the time of this letter, 1911, James Charles Wall (who went by the name of Charles) had published six books, primarily on antiquarian subjects (tombs, shrines, abbeys, ancient earthworks, and similar topics), but also one entitled Devils (1904), which looks at the depiction of devils throughout history and throughout the world, in architecture, art, legends, proverbs, moral tales etc. Two features of his works are particularly relevant to our examination of Charles Williams's early poetry. One is the strongly moral and Christian view of the world which emerges in them, a view, as we have seen, shared by CW's father and aunt, but in the uncle's case, tinged with rather more of a spirit of inquiry or even reluctant scepticism. For example, in discussing the origin of evil in the world in Devils, he says:

"The first man and woman, according to the literal wording of Holy Scripture, were Adam and Eve. It may be

an old-fashioned notion and not in accordance with the modern theory of evolution. Just so; but the old fashion of simple faith, as much as it is sneered at now, was a time of happy trust in the Divine inspiration, although it is not civilisation unless we are doubting, and trying to tear away the veil to peer into that which has been hidden from curious gaze; the content of the 'dark ages', lingering at the present day in Brittany and elsewhere, brought more true happiness. The old fashion will, however, be all-sufficient for the present purpose." (p.30)

Charles Williams, too, was torn between the "old fashion of simple faith" and a desire to "tear away the veil to peer into that which has been hidden from curious gaze." The latter desire no doubt contributed to his joining the Golden Dawn in 1917.

But Uncle Charles shared another important interest with his nephew, an interest in things Arthurian, which nonetheless remained, for him, subordinate to the greater antiquarian themes about which he wrote. The introduction to his book Shrines of British Saints (1905) for instance, begins:

"Long years since, ere the fenlands were drained or the forests of England were so denuded of their majestic wealth of timber and foliage that they became mere plantations, when all locomotion was by foot, horse, or coracle, men and women, fired by divine love, undeterred by the difficulties of travel or the dangers of preying wolves, carried the gospel news through the weird loneliness of vast solitudes to the tribes settled in the wildest recesses of the country.

"Those were days of mystic loveliness and poetical beauty, when the Isle of Avalon was regarded as the abode of the spirits of the blest, when the Isle of Ely was held to be miraculously enshrouded and watergirt for the protection of purity." (p.ix)

Or again, in The Tombs of the Kings of England, he states with great forcefulness,

CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

Renewal of Subscriptions

May I remind you that subscriptions for 1992 - 1993 are due on 1 March 1992. Payment should be made in pounds sterling, in favour of the Society, to the Hon Treasurer at the address below. If you are unable to send a cheque in sterling, please send an additional $6 to cover the cost of conversion.

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"Treating of the people of these early times we have to confront so much that is mythical. There is an increasing delight in consigning many brilliant characters to total oblivion as never having existed. Such is the case with the famed King Arthur.

"That Arthur really lived and reigned is now generally accepted, to doubt which is 'unwarrantable scepticism'. If we doubt the word of Geraldus Cambrensis, an eye-witness of Arthur's exhumation, how can we expect the writings of to-day to be accepted by future generations?" (p.11)

This book was published in 1891. We know that Charles was familiar with his uncle's writings, because he quotes from them in his notes on Arthurian themes, written between 1912 and 1917 in a commonplace book with a handwritten title called The Holy Grail.

These, then, are some of the influences on Charles Williams which form part of the background to his early poetry. The distinctiveness of his poetry in relation to these writings, and also to the more prominent poets of the period, will emerge as we examine his poems in greater depth. Let us now turn to Williams's first book and its circumstances of publications.

The Silver Stair. The Silver Stair is a collection of 84 sonnets whose primary theme is the experience of Love as seen from the perspective of a young man encountering that experience for the first time. When Williams composed these sonnets, he wrote within a long-established tradition of love poetry, going back at least to the sonnets in Dante's La Vita Nuova. As was common in the earlier treatments, Williams explores love as a spiritual as well as physical phenomenon, and the role of the beloved is key to the coming of love. In Williams's cycle, however, the beloved plays a crucial but not primary role in the lover's coming to terms with his own experience of love. That is, the beloved is a means to something even greater. This overshadowing of the beloved by Love itself is emphasised in the quotation from Yeats at the opening of the volume:

It is love that I am seeking for,
But of a beautiful, unheard-of kind
That is not in the world.

[...] never have two lovers kissed but they
Believed there was some other near at hand,
And almost wept because they could not find it.

(Yeats, The Shadowy Waters, quoted in SS, p.iii)

This view of love was one from which Williams never departed. His late novels and Arthurian poetry are more mature expressions of man lost in a world of love, but Love's operation in the City, the Household, and the Body are already present and fairly well-developed in The Silver Stair.

Williams's choice of the sonnet form presented him with particular challenges. Despite its simplicity of structure and singleness of idea, or perhaps because of these features, the sonnet demands a full command of the harmonies of language, powerful concentration of thought, and loftiness of subject matter to achieve the grandeur of which a short verse form is capable. (4) Williams is successful quite often in meeting these challenges. He chose the Petrarchan rather than the Shakespearean sonnet, which allowed him to avoid the epigrammatic effect of the final couplet in the Shakespearean twelve-two line division and to take full advantage of the Petrarchan octave-sestet division and its bipartite structure of observation / conclusion, statement / counterstatement, question / answer, etc (5) Indeed, this form is more suitable for the kind of exploration Williams attempts in the cycle, which is often tentative and probing rather than meant to drive a point home. Every sonnet adheres strictly to the "abbaabba" rhyme scheme in the octave, but the sestet varies considerably, with "cdecde" the most frequent structure. Williams uses iambic pentameter throughout, and the turn, or volta, is usually signalled by a gap in the text between octave and sestet.

The Silver Stair has a more comprehensive division of the sonnets as a whole into three "Books", each sonnet being

given a synoptic title. In an essay entitled "Me", written sometime after 1924, Williams explains his intention in each of the "Books":

"The 'story', to call it so, is of a young man [not himself, he states earlier in the essay] thoroughly discontented with the world who suddenly and for the first time falls in love - that is the first book. The second is concerned with the development of that experience; and the particular point about it is that he is discontented with the ordinary result of love. He feels it in a way that urges him away from marriage as much as towards it; because he feels love, Love as a being not as a name. [...] he sets aside the ordinary things and enters (he and his lady) on the path of virginal love. And the third book is a kind of ode in praise of Love as God and Man [...]. (p.3)

Book I has 15 sonnets, Book II has 51, and Book III has 16; Book III also includes a set of six sonnets entitled "The Passion of Love", which deals with various facets of Christ's Passion.

The synoptic titles of the poems apparently were not present in the original version of the cycle (by synoptic I mean lengthy and descriptive, as, "The predestined Lover, ignorant of Love, declares his Creed", or, "The lover, ending, praises his lady in the fullness of Love", although some of the sonnets do have short titles as well, for example, sonnet 67, "An Ascription"; the two prefatory sonnets which precede Book I are simply titled "I" and "II"). In his letter to Aunt Alice, Williams says of the visit to the Meynells, "that I promised to make the few alterations Mrs Meynell had suggested, & to think out a title for each one (which Fred Page is now doing, while I criticise)" (f.3r). Fred Page, as you may recall, worked with Williams at the Oxford University Press and introduced Williams to the Meynells. Most of the titles seem connected (more or less strongly) with the sonnets, but a few seem remote at best. It is at least arguable that the titles tend to become distractions and take away from the impact of the poetry by forcing too much attention to themselves.

Nonetheless, the titles do serve to unify the sonnets in such a way that a general thematic development is discernible.

While we are on the subject of titles, it might be helpful to look at their usage by other poets. Williams was not the first to employ synoptic titles, but they were not common in the major sonnet and love poetry collections which preceded The Silver Stair. Petrarch, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Meredith, and Bridges had neither synoptic nor short titles. Dante (in, e.g., Rossetti's translation of La Vita Nuova) gave short expositions of the content of his sonnets, but not synoptic titles. Yeats, however, has similar titles in, for instance, "The Wind among the Reeds". Poem 52 is titled "The Lover mourns for the Loss of Love"; poem 53, "He mourns for the change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World". Rossetti's translations of the early Italian poets also include synoptic titles. For example, sonnet III by Guido Cavalcanti is entitled "He compares all Things with his Lady, and finds them wanting." Similarly, sonnet 16 of The Silver Stair has the title, "God has set the world in his lady's heart; the lover questions of his part therein." To what extent the titles for Williams's sonnets are Fred Page's contribution rather than Williams's is not known, but Williams seens to have been agreeable to their inclusion, and at least one reviewer, in The Tablet, welcomed the titles with great enthusiasm:

"His book is the more readily acceptable because he has set forth the argument of each sonnet in a heading of simple prose. To the expert reader the poems will not seem to need the explanation. But the general reader is not ashamed to confess that he is not an expert. And to everyone the pleasure of a first reading is greatly increased by this kind of courtesy."
(The Tablet, Feb 15, 1913, p. 249)

I have attempted to give some idea of the structure of The Silver Stair. The circumstances of its composition are not entirely unknown to us, although we could wish for more details. Theodore Maynard, who met with Williams on several occasions after Poems of Conformity

was published, states that Williams wrote the sonnet sequence between "his twenty-first and twenty-third years" (6), that would be between 1907 and 1909. He met Florence Conway in 1908 at a church Christmas party, and she reports that,

"One January night I went to a lecture. On my way home [...] Charles overtook me. He put a parcel into my hands, saying he had written a Sonnet Sequence called The Silver Stair, Its theme was Renunciation. Would I read it and tell him my opinion? [...] There were eighty-two sonnets and I read them all." (7)

It would appear from this statement that the two prefatory sonnets had not yet been written, and the date Florence received the poems was probably January of 1910. It is clear from the tone and themes of the sonnets that Charles had begun to probe his spiritual experience rather deeply, particularly in relation to the experience of Love (both divine and earthly) even before he met Florence. There is no indication that he had fallen in love with anyone prior to meeting her; in fact, a number of sonnets describe a young man who has heard and read about (romantic) love but has so far failed to experience it:

2. Yet if in very truth such god there be
How shall he not reveal himself to me?
O Love, O Love, exalt thyself, O Love!

4. Nor I the less salute you that no face
Hath sent these heart-beats quicker, that no hand
Hath e'er touched mine save in due courtesy.

5. Speak, servitors of Love, speak, ye elect,
Who hold your stations in his mysteries,
Tell us again how sweet the knowledge is!

Although, as noted earlier, Williams disclaims identification with the young man of the poems, he nevertheless qualifies that statement in some notes he made, called "The Silver Stair: A new sonnet-sequence",

where he says, "the poem [i.e., the collection of sonnets as a whole] is to be read as the record of one's soul's response to the Divine Love: praising human love even while refusing its usual expression, and refusing this, only to press on to that higher thing to which it is confessedly a first step" (f.3). (8) We recall here the Yeats quotation, "It is love that I am seeking for, / But of a beautiful, unheard-of kind / That is not in the world."

I want to return to the philosophical, of perhaps (more accurately) theological, basis of the sonnet sequence as it relates particularly to that of Yeats in The Shadowy Waters, from which the quotation at the beginning on The Silver Stair is taken, and that of Patmore in The Angel in the House and The Unknown Eros. But first let us examine some of the poems in The Silver Stair.

These sonnets are about love. But how is love defined? The entire sonnet cycle is itself an answer to that question, with sometimes more and sometimes less directness, so this summary analysis can only give you an idea of the whole, but cannot do complete justice to it. However, I will make an attempt. Sonnet 38 treats of the meanings which lurk within the word:

> I love her! O! what other word could keep
> In many tongues one clear immutable sound,
> Having so many meanings? It is bound,
> First, to religion, signifying: "The steep
> Whence I see God", translated into sleep
> It is: "Glad waking", into thought: "Fixed ground;
> A measuring-rod", and for the body: "Found."
> These know I, with one more, which is: "To weep."

Religion, sleep, thought, the body - these significations by no means exhaust the forms of love. For Williams, whatever can be experienced in life, becomes a means to know love, even "to weep". But it is not accidental that he binds love's many meanings, "First, to religion." The workings of God and Love are interwoven. Both speak, and both command response:

Then rang a great voice, shaking tower and booth,
the beggar's porch, and Love his own high seat.

Men say it thundered; others, that there fell,
Being falsely built, part of the city wall;
And some few: "Therein God spake." Who can tell?
But indeed this may be, if it be,
O Lord of Love, assure me that thy call,
Thy summons, is not laid on me, not me! (43)

This sonnet is entitled, "To one, sitting at the receipt of custom, Love said, 'Leave all and follow me.' But love has its cost, for Love is also "The steep whence I see God" (38), and that steep is the one Christ has already climbed: "God's feet came up toward us from Nazareth, / Olivet, Tabor, Golgotha to climb" (Prefatory II). In sonnet 42 he contrasts a garden like Eden, made for lovers, and another garden, where Christ showed to man God's greatest expression of love:

(Hush! also in a garden - O, too hard
The ways thereof that feet have trodden, scarred!
Too crushed the grass by a prone agonyl
But there, at night, by men with faces marred,
Were olives gathered for Gethsemane,
Was hewn the wood, shaped then for Calvary.)

This entire sestet is enclosed in parentheses, almost as an after-thought to the joyful affirmations of the octave. The lover is intimidated by this expression of Love: "In sight of stretched hands and tormented brows / How should I dare to venture or to win / Love?" (33). He is not, however, always so fearful. In sonnet 44, entitled "Love said, 'He that loveth his Life shall lose it'", the lover stands in Love's house and affirms:

"Surely", I said, "none would this house forsake,
Once found; yet still there lacks a thing, to make
Perfect all joy that doth our hearts befall."

That hour a servant plucked me by the arm,
And showed me near at hand a little door,
Narrow, low-arched, and carven there-above:
"Through me, by losing, shall a man find love."

I tremble ere I open, yet am sure
That in his own house Love shall meet no harm.

As the lover goes deeper into the experience of Love, he begins to see beyond the pain that is part of love, to the joy which the pain subserves. This affirmation of God and Love is the context within which all else that happens to the lover must be interpreted.

God stands in relation to lesser gods just as Love operates through the lesser loves: they can be a means to the one end, Love, or they can become rivals. One such god is Death, and at the beginning of the sonnet cycle this is the only god the lover acknowledges: "There is no god, nor has been, nor can be / (Our folly this, and this our wisdom saith), / Who is so strong and pitiful as Death" (3). In sonnet 1, "The predestined Lover, ignorant of Love, declares his Creed" (title) and advises,

Therefore with equal eyes and steadfast heart
Tread underfoot all excellent desire;
Seek no great thing, lest any hope or fear
Lay hold on thee. So Death, when he draw near,
Shall find thy soul not slothful to depart,
Nor without ease shall quench a little fire.

So speaks the lover while he remains ignorant of Love. But after he "questions his Fellows concerning love" (title,2) he cautions against summoning Death, for "be sure he never loitereth":

Wilt thou desire him therefore? O be wise,
Turn backward o'er the trodden path thy face,
And be afraid to entreat him. (3)

Nevertheless, by the end of the sonnet cycle, death, too, has become transcended by a greater God. In the fifth "Passion of Love" sonnet (77), subtitled "The Death of Love", he describes Christ dying on the cross, and urges us to

[...] watch beside his sepulchre.
We know not; surely Love may rise again,

Who on the cross of all men's lust was slain.

We can now think back to the poem by Williams's father that we looked at earlier, and see the difference in tone if not in belief. I quote the last stanza:

"Oh Saviour Christ! Thou knowest all
The bitter sense of loss;
Be near us when the shadows fall,
And help us bear the cross.
Though lonely here the path may be,
Where pain and sorrow are,
We trust our dear ones dwell with Thee,
And that is better far.

A lot more can be said about the rival, lesser loves, but I want to touch on another question of interest, and that is the role of the beloved in the poems. The paths of earthly love are various, yet each one leads to the greater Love. Thus, in Prefatory sonnet II, God's voice has ceased from time, but He continues to call in other ways:

His ambush in a pebble's heart, His fleet
Passage in light and shadows of leaves, O soul,
Hast thou escaped; wilt thou deny thy clay
If thereupon He stablish His control
In mortal eyes that snare it, mortal feet
That tread the windings of salvation's way?

This lover, who has escaped God's ambush in the pebble and the leaves, has now been snared by the beloved. Through her eyes and feet God established control. For the lover, the beloved is a means to his salvation, not an end in herself. (One sonnet is titled, "That for every man a woman holds the secret of salvation.") This crucial but finally subordinate role of the beloved is reflected in the number of sonnets addressed to her: of the eighty-two sonnets with titles, the lover's lady is mentioned in the titles of eight and "woman" is mentioned in five more, whereas thirty-six have titles concerning love (Love often appears as a personification). Within the sonnets themselves, forty-one (that is, one half of the total) make no mention of the beloved either directly or indirectly, although many of the rest give significant

attention to her. This omission is not accidental. In the essay, "Me", Williams says,

"[...] I am always told I am too intellectual, and I suppose that is largely true: my verse has been concerned with the things of the mind, or at least with the things of the body considered in some intellectual relationship and form.

"[...] You may remember I suggested something of the sort with Sir Thomas Browne; he preferred thinking about the image of the thing in his mind rather than its image on earth. It is the reactions and repurcussions of a thing in my mind and in those of others with which I have been largely concerned." (p.2)

Williams goes on to say that in "the first love sonnet of The Silver Stair (9) the young lover meets his lady for the first time and

"remarks dreamily that 'All making and all breaking of all laws Surely from one face hath looked forth on' him - this is his first feeling; not that her eyes were brown, or her hair, or the shape of her nose, but a bright little metaphysical notion of tht kind. And he goes on in the same way - the lady is a microcosm of creation, she is significant of a farther Reality, she suggests the possible terrors and delights of this new experience, and so on; but there is precious little description of her - you don't know anything more about her appearance than before she occurred."(p.2)

Again, we see in sonnet 21 the lover asserting,

> For no escaping glances, words that fall,
> For no desire of soft lip or high brow,
> For none of these, beloved, do I vow
> Love: somewhat yet is hidden in them all.
> These are the echo to me, not the call;
> A fair dream, whence is not full meaning now:
> However they be beautiful, and thou
> Throned in them as a queen within her hall.

The sentiment expressed in this sonnet is close to that found in the Yeats quotation, which concludes,

> "Yet never have two lovers kissed but they

Believed there was some other near at hand,
And almost wept because they could not find it.

These lines are spoken by Forgael, captin of a ship whose crew plunders other ships as he sails uncharted seas searching for the deep reality of love rather than "its image on the mirror". (9) Forgael, too, sees the fair dream as more real than the substantial body, but there is a difference between Forgael's dreams and those of the lover in The Silver Stair. The world Forgael inhabits is not the same, after all, for his world makes no mention of the Christian God who died on a cross of Love. The Silver Stair's young lover is not despairing in his quest for the greater love; rather, Williams tells us in his notes, The Silver Stair is

"a Christian poem which, in the course of a human story, invokes and confesses to the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, our Lady [...] and the Archangels and the Baptist; a poem which, ever and anon, turns to the life of Jesus Christ as a ?human parable of Divine love, indeed the incarnate life of Deity, born of a virgin, revealed to disciples (78), slighted and crucified by the world (75,77), and re-arisen as the Inspirer of human life." (f.2)

And yet, Williams does not swing over into the philosophical stance of Patmore. When the young lover finds love, Williams insists, "it is a revelation from on high, and therefore not to be accepted, by him, on the ordinary terms of human lovers. This is the crux of the poem" (notes on The Silver Stair, f.3). Williams contrasts this idea of human love with Patmore's, in his poem "Sponsa Dei", where, Williams says, it is only "a symbol of divine love, to be itself renounced, even as one would 'renounce' the shell for the kernel". "Sponsa Dei" ends,

O, heart, remember thee,
That Man is none,
Save One.
What if this Lady by thy Soul, and He
Who claims to enjoy her sacred beauty be,
Not thou, but God; and thy sick fire
A female vanity, [...]
A reflex heat
Flash'd on thy cheek from His immense desire,
Which waits to crown, beyond thy brain's conceit,

Thy nameless, secret, hopeless longing sweet,
Not by-and-by, but now,
Unless deny Him thou! ("Sponsa Dei")

Williams argues that such love

"would be not a means of grace, but only a further temptation to sin. But the poem [The Silver Stair] is to be read as the record of one soul's response to the Divine Love: praising human love even while refusing its usual expression, and refusing this, only to press on to that higher thing to which it is confessedly a first step.

"The poet, is, then, reconciled to life by his vision of love, and because he can see something of the purpose of God [...]. (f.3)

If we had more time, it would be quite instructive to look more deeply into the significance of that phrase, "praising human love even while refusing its usual expression", for that subject leads into an exploration of how Williams treats, in this, his earliest published work, the great themes of the Way of Affirmation of Images and the Way of Negation of Images. In The Silver Stair the lover is inspired yet dissatisfied by human love, despite his awareness that the Way of Affirmation is pleasing to God. He longs to know the deeper mysteries revealed only to those who follow the Way of Rejection. (We observe the contrast here with the more accepting attitude of the late Victorians, as evidenced by Williams's father's writings, which we looked at earlier.) The sonnet sequence does not build, as might be expected, to grander eulogies of the beloved; rather, the last Book gives its deepest attention to the Way of Rejection of Images, especially in the six Passion of Christ sonnets.

Williams says that The Silver Stair "was meant as a study in and song of virginal love" ("Me", p.3). Florence Conway, as noted earlier, was told by him that its theme was Renunciation. In fact, two poems have the same title, "Of Renunciation", one in Book II (48) and the penultimate sonnet in Book III (81). In sonnet 45 the lover is given "two offerings of love" (title) and told to choose:

But if thou choose love, wilt thou have this gift
Fashioned in work of silver or of gold? -
Aureate, bought with toil and holy thrift,

With filling and with emptying horn and cruse?
Argent, with tears, sad hours, and frustrate hold? -
Or wilt thou enter empty-handed. Choose.

The terms silver and gold do not appear in the first half of the sonnet cycle at all, but in the second half they appear several times, always with the same respective associations. What is curious is that commentators have invariably misinterpreted the meanings. The three primary passages are found in sonnets 45, 67, and 80. In sonnet 67, "An Ascription", pertaining to God the Holy Ghost, the lover says, "The silver and the golden stairs are His, / The altar His - yea, His the lupanar." Sonnet 80, "The Consummation", first describes wedded lover "stretched on the golden couch of their delight", then contrasts another group of people in the sestet, who proclaim:

"Sleep yet! This is our holy day we greet,
With notes of silver echoing its fame.
Sleep! Toward white gates, down many a shouting street,
Masters of hope and passion and sorrow, we
With clash of sword on shield, move and acclaim
The solemn Feast of Love's Virginity.

In each case, silver is associated with renunciation, the Way of Rejection of Images, and gold is associated with the Way of Affirmation of Images: the silver stairs and the altar, the golden stairs and the lupanar. Other examples could be given if time permitted. Yet, despite the overwhelming consistency in the use of the two terms, silver and gold, their associations are reversed. H N Fairchild, for instance, boldly asserts that, "although theoretically Williams seeks only to restore the erotic silver stair to its proper dignity of kinship with the ascetic golden stair, in these poems his personal preference for the former kind of holiness is obvious." (10) That statement is remarkable for how exactly wrong it is in every way.

I would like to end with a few extracts from reviews on The Silver Stair in journals of the day. The favourable response Williams met with was uniform among his reviewers, beginning with Alice and Wilfred Meynell, who were responsible for having the sonnets published in the first place. The Times Literary Supplement (November 28, 1912) said, "his verse is [...] full of quiet melody, and his thoughts cultured and refined." J S Phillimore, in The Dublin Review (April 1913), extolled the sonnets at great

length, beginning his review with, "To come to Mr Charles Williams' Silver Stair [...] is to pass into an atmosphere of wise, deliberate serenity and hear very noble voices. His execution is faultless, his frugality quietly shames the riot of some of the "Georgians"; he realizes perfect freedom of expression without a trace of rebellion or lawlessness: a poet after Patmore's own heart [...]." The Tablet (February 15, 1913) placed Williams among the great writers of love poetry, with "an intellect imaginatively free, responsibly submissive [...]." Sir Walter Raleigh, who held the Chair of Poetry at Oxford at that time, said of it "there is no doubt about it; real poetry." And that is where I will end.

Endnotes

1. Theodore Maynard, "The Poetry of Charles Williams" The North American Review (Sept. 1919, Vol. 210) p. 403.

2. See Anne Lohrli, compiler, Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850-1859, Conducted by Charles Dickens (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) p. 4.

3. Contributors to the first series have been identified: neither Stansby nor Walter Williams appears in the list.

4. See Sidney Lee, Elizabethan Sonnets: Newly Arranged and Indexed (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., Ltd., 1904), Vol.1, pp. x-xi.

5. See John Fuller, The Sonnet (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1972), p,2.

6. Maynard, p. 403.

7. Florence Williams, "As I Remember", Episcopal Churchnews (April 12, 1953), p. 14.

8. Charles Williams, handwritten notes entitled "The Silver Stair: A new sonnet-sequence", 6 folios, located at Box 4 at the Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

9. W B Yeats, The Shadowy Waters in The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W B Yeats, edited by Peter Allt and Russell K Alspach (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1940), p. 230.

10. Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, Vol. VI: 1920 - 1965 (London: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 263.